

Digital (in-)visibilities: Spatializing and visualizing politics of voice

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Abstract:

This commentary focusses on the conditions of migrant (in-)visibilities in digital mediascapes. Addressing the ambivalent and complex communicative architecture of voice in the context of digitization and migration, it tackles three fundamental questions:

Does digital visibility contest political silencing of the migrant subject? Is the migrant who speaks also heard? And what kind of recognition do digital visibilities allow for and what kind of misrecognition might they hide? Thinking through Arendt's subjective-in-between (1998), this article reflects on the value of voice beyond its conception as an individual right and as a mediated occasion of appearance.

Introduction

At times of digital hyper-visibility of diversity and opinions, meanings of voice and recognition demand profound rethinking. Not least as subaltern voicesⁱ, such as those of migrants, now regularly appear across digital mediascapes. This article addresses the

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ambivalent and complex communicative architecture of voice and examines whether and how its appearance matters in the intensely mediated spaces of migrant politics.

I tackle this question as I found the empirically observed ambivalence of voice in the context of migration puzzling: we now often see migrants speaking across western digital mediascapes, yet such representations rarely challenge hegemonic politics of racial order. In fact, I observed, sometimes they do the exact opposite: affirming racial categories of speakers and hearers, no matter the intentions behind their appearance in media and platforms. Using these observations as starting point, in this article I reflect on meanings and limits of voice, especially when subaltern voices are seen and heard across digital mediascapes. I raise questions on whether and how conceptions of the value of voice as an account of one's self (Couldry 2010) and as a liberal "right to speak on [one's] own issues and concerns" (Phillips 2003: 264) indeed advances migrants' recognition beyond momentary, curated, and individualized digital appearance.

With brief references to empirical evidence from across western digital mediascapes, I argue that we need to move beyond conceptions of voice as autonomous and bounded speech acts, and as rights of individuals to narrate *their* stories. Instead, and following Arendt, I propose that we need to examine voice that matters relationally, as an incomplete act of storytelling, shaped in the "subjective-in-between" (Arendt, 1998) – the narrative, representational and geographical space where those speaking and those hearing converge or have a responsibility to converge.

The argument that I set forward has emerged inductively and out of my observations across a range of western sites of migrant arrivals and settlement, especially after the 2015 so-called

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“migration crisis” in Europe. Since the early days of “the crisis”, progressive media and public-facing local and transnational institutions showed growing awareness of the marginalization of migrant voices in national and transnational publics, exacerbated through migrant misrepresentation and stereotyping in mainstream media. Newspapers like *The Guardian* in the UK invited migrants to share their own stories (2015); organizations like UNESCO developed journalistic toolkits for fair reporting on migration that emphasized the value of migrant voices (2021), and numerous relevant debates on the value of voice unraveled across media and policy domains with the support of organizations such as UNHCR and the Council of Europe (Berry et al., 2016; Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017). The post-2015 context of real or perceived crisis has opened a public space for reflection and deliberation on the value of migrant voices – a space that has been highly mediated in its expressions but also in its contradictions. It is precisely the contradictory consequences of migrant visibility that inform my reflections on the digital order of appearance in western mediascapes.

Let me first outline how I saw migrants appear as speaking actors across digital mediascapes. Between 2015-2021 – the period of my analysis – media like *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, and *The New York Times*, among others, systematically integrated in their reporting on migration and “crises” voices from those at the borders of Europe and the US. Integration of migrant voices in mainstream news is not a mere result of campaigning and debating migrant rights, of course. It also reflects mainstream media’s attempt to survive in the user-generated-content (UGC) social media environment (Wardle and Williams, 2010). Mediated migrant visibility thus needs to be understood within shifting representational cultures shaped at the juncture of technological and political change. These representational shifts have also influenced visual and textual narratives of migration across other institutional spaces and platforms. For

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example, *Refugee Radio Network*, an online grassroots initiative established in Hamburg, Germany by refugees and broadcasting to multilingual audiences across the world, attracted substantial public funding; especially between 2016-18 local and European governments supported this initiative, recognizing refugees as newsmakers, not just as subjects of news-making (Refugee Radio Network, 2022). Other communication campaigns of national and international scale also aimed to counter stereotypes, hostility, and misrecognition by promoting migrants as speakers and not as silent subjects in stories of migration told on their behalf (Bellardi et al. 201). Among these campaigns, the most prominent perhaps has been a flagship and ongoing project by the International Organization of Migration (IOM), #Iamamigrant, to which I will return.

The growing occasions of migrants speaking in mainstream media and institutional platforms, supported by integration of UGC (or UGC-style) representations, as briefly introduced above, might have diversified digital visibilities but they have not necessarily democratized politics of voice and recognition. In fact, my visual and discourse analysis of such visibilities, over the period 2015-21 reveals a more complex story – a story of voices often contained within a narrative and visual grammar of Otherness, where migrants speak as actors that are either exceptional or generic, and who belong to cultures, geographies, and histories that are fundamentally different to those of their audiences. Let me briefly explain.

When it comes to mainstream media, the advancement of migrant visibilities as speakers remains conditioned to the dominant patterns of western reporting on war, uprooting, and migration. For example, searching the archives of *The Guardian* on migration in April 2021, among the top seven stories, I recorded four stories with images of masses of faceless migrants at borders, only one story focusing on the image of a singular male figure (who is

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however clearly identified as silent, suffering victim), and two commentaries written by British white, male columnists. Migrant voices often appeared in the individual news stories but regularly did so to narratively illustrate western politics of security or humanitarianism. The same search in the archives of the French *Le Monde* produced similar results with the top five stories all visually represented either by masses of faceless migrants or closed borders and security forces. Conducting the same kind of search over the following months repeatedly produced similar kinds of findings. Even with some variations, the dominant patterns in mainstream media visual and narrative grammar became apparent: focused on the binary narrative and visual schemes of security and/or suffering, news stories left little space for migrants to speak as complex and situated agents of migration (unlike politicians or institutional actors). Going deeper in analyzing these stories, I often observed that histories and biographies of individuals and collectivities who migrate lack, or at best are vaguely situated in, specific historical and geopolitical spatialities and contextualities that connect past and present, or the Global North with the Global South. Most often migrant words appear detached from relational geographies of power that connect their lives and mobility to the histories of western states, markets, and audiences.

Institutional initiatives such as #Iamamigrant, that exist outside the fast and furious media political economy, have emerged precisely as a counterpoint to mainstream media's storytelling, which, as shown, largely continues to displace migrant voices from historical and geopolitical relationalities. #Iamamigrant's webpage notes that the project "allows the voices of individuals to shine through and provides an honest insight into the triumphs and tribulations of migrants of all backgrounds and at all phases of their migratory journeys" (2020). In this project, the few hundred stories collected regularly from across the world present individual migrants as actors who narrate their stories. Yet, their invisible institutional

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curation catalogues individual stories within western scripts on migration: racialized speakers mostly fall within the categories of the deserving entrepreneurial or the undeserving ignorant migrant. For example, Carlos, speaks as a hardworking Indian migrant in Italy, grateful for western publics' welcome and their endearing conception of him as an Oriental "mythical figure". Cameroonian Mama Jackie speaks with her own voice from Chad but reproduces western policy priorities to keep African migrants away from western shores; as she explains, economic opportunities for migrants are better within Africa compared to Europe. Souleyman pushes this narrative even further and into the thanatopolitics of migration, by speaking of naïve migrants who do not realize that crossing the Mediterranean from Africa means risking death.

As shown in the different examples, migrants are more and more present as agentic speakers in digital mediascapes. Yet, the presence of their voices is not enough to destabilize an order of appearance (Arendt, 1998), which divides narratives, representations, and geographies between the west's own and its outside(r). Importantly, even within progressive and campaigning initiatives to *let the subaltern speak* (Spivak 2010), as those mentioned above, performative forms of power (Butler 2015) remain unchallenged. They do so, not through the denial of voice but through the containment of the right to speak within a digital order of appearance: migrants speak as outsiders and as individuals who fit within given categories – entrepreneurial or vulnerable agents who make no claims to equality or reparations. By decontextualizing voice, migration becomes reaffirmed as an out-of-the-ordinary condition, a crisis, for which the West remains a benevolent and troubled outsider, an observer.

Based on research findings and against conceptions of voice as an individual and contained speech act, I propose that voice matters only if understood relationally – through the

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subjective-in-between (Arendt 1998). Following Arendt, I argue that we need to understand voice as more than “a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent” (1998: 182), and more as an incomplete and dialogical act that ties speakers and hearers within relational understanding of their common concerns (or what should be common concerns – in this case, causes of human displacement and mobility injustice).

To explain, I understand all migrant voices as agentic acts, yet their appearance does justice to speakers and challenges racial order of digital appearance only when understood through their relational situatedness. This situatedness is sometimes seen across mainstream and alternative media, even if not consistently. It is more often seen in co-creative and participatory projects of news making and storytelling in which migrants are recognized as coproducers of narratives and where they have a say on the digital architecture of their appearance. I was privileged enough to be part of such a project; to collaborate with a research team constituted by academics, artists, new migrants, and activists to produce an experimental digital archive of the city of refuge (www.digitalcityofrefuge.com)ⁱⁱ.

Recognizing the problem with the order of appearance across digital mediascapes, we aimed to think of voice through the subjective-in-between; what I learned from that project is that voice matters in its narrative, representational, and geographical relationality.

I understand *narrative relationality* through recognition of migrants as narrative actors who witness and experience injustice and who make different claims to freedom. Their narrative autonomy demands recognition of complex and affective voices, which might speak of pain, survival but also of anger and indignation. Their right to speak as complex actors who can make political and social claims connects subjective uniqueness with the intersubjective spatialities (Arendt 1998) of migration. In this context, conceptions of voice need to be

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recognized beyond the written form, as its different modalities across platforms and digital spaces – visual, written, and auditory – reflect agentic complexity and diversity beyond norms preset within western systems of knowledge. In *the digital city of refuge* project, we tackled narrative relationality by letting migrants decide on the architecture of their appearance, visually and narratively. Adapting an experimental methodology of urban storytelling walks, participants were invited to decide where to walk to and what to talk about, thus choosing the situatedness of their voice in a range of spatialities and temporalities.

Relatedly, *representational relationality* refers to systematic efforts to normatively shift the “architecture of power” (Benjamin, 2019: 32), that is, to digitally diversify orders of appearance so that migrants are not granted the right to speak as fundamentally different subjects compared to western subjects – either through their acute suffering or their exceptional success alone. Rather *representational relationality* calls for multiple and diverse visibilities for all different actors of migration – not only those who move, but also those receiving them and those left behind. In our project, we aimed to reflect on representational relationality by creating spaces for different actors affected by migration appear, challenging conceptions of exceptional uniqueness and boundedness of migrant voices and experiences.

Finally, *geographical relationality* calls for a commitment to contextualization and historicization of storytelling and recognizes entangled geographies of mobility. These become apparent in individual and collective stories of those moving and also the places they shape, not least western metropolises. Specifically, geographical relationality invites the opening of representational spaces for voices that witness and experience the intertwinement of transnational human mobility, colonial histories, and environmental disasters. In the case of the *digital city of refuge*, deliberately framing the project through the city rather than

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through any exceptionality of migrant representations was precisely an attempt to speak to the entangled geographies of here and there, of past and present.

Conclusion

This article represents an attempt to reflect on voice beyond conceptions of an individual, self-constituted and contained speech act. It has instead highlighted the need for more diverse and relational digital visibilities that situate actors of migration within the past and present trajectories of regional and global power struggles. Understood in this context, the digital subjective-in-between opens up a space of appearance which remains unequal, but which recognize multiple visibilities: of voices that are diverse, performative and impure, always constituted in relation to the imagined and real co-speaker, hearer, and monitor. This framing of voice surpasses liberal concerns with the representation of *the voice of Others*. Rather, it addresses difficult questions beyond conceptions of migration as an exceptional and external to the West problem: asking how to co-produce spaces where we tell stories to each other, in creative but liberatory, even if imbalanced, flawed, or difficult ways and in unequal terms. Thinking about the subjective-in-between is thus not envisioning representational spaces that neutralize inequalities, but instead spaces that make inequalities more apparent and, consequently, meaningfully contested.

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ⁱ Conceptions of the subaltern became influential through Spivak’s work (2010) and her Gramscian understanding of suppressed subjects that are deprived from their identities and can only be heard within hegemonic narratives of the oppressor, especially as these are shaped within western system of knowledge. In postcolonial studies, others have expanded conceptions of the subaltern to speak to both oppression and resistance (cf. Chandra 2015; Majumdar 2017). In this article I use the concept in relation to western systems of knowledge, which however cannot fully contain migrant voices and agency.

ⁱⁱ This project took place across Athens, Berlin and London from 2017 to 2019 (M. Georgiou – Principle Investigator; S. Hall – Co-Investigator; D. Dajani – Research Fellow; K. Kolbe – Research Assistant; the urban walk storytelling methodology developed in collaboration with Counterpoints Arts, and specifically the photographer Marcia Chandra, and its creative outputs are available at www.digitalcityofrefuge.com. The project was supported by the Rockefeller Foundation in collaboration with the Institute of Global Affairs, LSE.